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In the fall of 1945, Maj. Gen. Leonard Wing came marching home

The headline of the Nov. 6, 1945, edition of the Rutland Herald proclaimed the big news of the day before: "25,000 Vermonters Give Roaring 'Hello' To Gen. Wing on His Return to Rutland." Large crowds lined Merchants Row and clouds of confetti flew through the air, tossed from the top floors of the Service Building. Everyone tried to catch a glimpse of the city's military hero of World War II: Maj. Gen. Leonard Wing, commander of the 43rd Infantry Division.

Wing acknowledged familiar faces in the crowd along the entire route, especially the children. According to the paper, "Gen. Wing grinned cheerfully at the thousands of school children who flocked by the reviewing stand during the parade. He spotted a next-door neighbor, 'Jimmy' Jeffords, carrying a large flag and cried out, 'Hello there, Jimmy.'"

Wing was a lawyer turned general — a favorite son in the eyes of Rutland City.

Born in Ira in 1893, Leonard Wing established strong roots in Rutland City. He graduated from Rutland High School, read for the law in the city and entered the bar in 1917. However, Wing also possessed a strong interest in protecting the country. During World War I, he enlisted in the army. Though he never went overseas, he rose to the rank of first lieutenant. Discharged in late 1918, he returned to Rutland and opened up a law firm, Wing and Morse, later to become Fenton, Wing and Morse.

But the military remained in Wing's bloodstream. In 1919, he enlisted in Company A (of Rutland), 172nd Infantry, Vermont National Guard, and immediately received a commission as a second lieutenant. He rose through the ranks, first lieutenant, captain, major, lieutenant colonel and finally as colonel of the 172nd in 1933. A promotion to brigadier general followed in 1938, when he assumed command of the 86th Brigade consisting of regiments from Vermont and Maine.

Then came World War II. As America prepared for potential conflict,

National Guard troops received activation notices and the 86th Brigade mobilized for war. Combined with troops from Connecticut and Rhode Island, the Guardsmen formed a division, the 43rd. After war erupted, the division continued its training in the United States before getting orders directing it to the South Pacific and its Japanese defenders.

Originally, the 43rd was to be part of the force landed at Guadalcanal, but a sinking of one of the troop transports, fortunately with minimal loss of life, curtailed that assignment. Eventually, the division made it to Guadalcanal in 1943, then participated on the assault on Rendova Island and then the island of New Georgia on June 30, 1943. There, the 43rd fought for 81 consecutive days. One day, infiltrating Japanese surrounded his command post, but Wing ordered his artillery commander to launch a barrage around the post and effectively destroyed the attackers. New Georgia established a reputation for the unit and respect for Wing's leadership.

On Oct. 7, 1943, Gen. Wing received a promotion to major general and division command. With this honor, Wing earned a signal distinction — the "only National Guard officer promoted to commanding general of an active combat division."

During the war, Wing earned a couple of nicknames: Fellow officers called him "Red" for his crop of red hair. Adm. William Halsey referred to him as "Friar Tuck," after one of Robin Hood's band.

After New Georgia, the division successfully struck at New Guinea, repelling numerous assaults. Afterwards, it replenished its depleted ranks and then at full strength landed on the

island of Luzon in the Philippines on Jan. 9, 1945. The 43rd secured the American left flank in the operation. Wing reported on the 43rd action, "We held the line while the other divisions made an end run to Manila. And we held the line so successfully that little resistance was met by the other divisions as they rolled south to Manila."

During this period, Wing directed his division in the capture of critical Hill 355, a hill that commanded the landing beaches. After that

success, the 43rd continue to eliminate "pockets of resistance" in the neighboring mountains and defeating the enemy along the Shimbu Line. Sixth Army commander Walter Krueger reported the deed succinctly: "Red Wing has crushed the left wing of the Shimbu Line."

The final Luzon campaign served as the 43rd's crowning achievement — the capture of the Ipo Dam, that contained Manila's largest water supply. Wing developed a plan that defied all "established military thinking." Nevertheless, Gen. Krueger approved, stating, "You try this because I think it is smart and I think it will work." It worked thoroughly and the Americans captured the vital dam intact. Wing reported, "The Japs were damn well licked."

During the Philippines Campaign, the 43rd Division earned a new name. The men in the ranks officially christened the unit, the "Winged Victory" Division in honor of their commander. Wing could not have asked for a greater appreciation coming from the enlisted men.

One anecdote summed up the commander's resourcefulness and leadership. While on Luzon, a company was involved in a tough fight. Wing arrived on the scene, where the beleaguered company commander proclaimed, "We must have reinforcements at once!" Wing calmly replied, "You've got them, haven't you? I'm here." Reinvigorated by their general's presence, the company surged forward and drove back the enemy.

After the Philippines, the 43rd Division temporarily served as part of the occupation force in Japan before becoming the first complete division to return to the United States in September 1945.

Hearing of the division's projected stateside return, Rutland appointed a committee for a "great 'welcome home' reception" for the general. Preliminary plans included, "A parade with all the attendant color, music by massed bands, a public gathering in Depot Square and presentation of testimonials of the city's gratitude to the homecoming Pacific war hero."

This all culminated in that joyous celebration on Nov. 5. Topping it off was Wing being the recipient of the Distinguished Service Medal in front of thousands of Vermonters who appreciated everything he accomplished in his career.

Wing participated in similar parades in Montpelier; Augusta, Maine; Providence, R.I.; and Hartford, Conn., proud to representing "his own

boys" of the 43rd.

He praised his soldiers frequently. He believed, "When the history of this war is written, it will be said that the 43rd division never failed to gain an objective, never gave up an inch of ground and although I served with them at times when we seemed to be on the brink of disaster, I tasted with them victory on every battlefield."

On the night of Dec. 19, 1945, the general went to bed, kissed his wife goodnight and decided to read. He then had a coronary and died before medical help arrived. The myocarditis diagnosed in the Philippines caused his death. Wing was 52. The veteran never had the opportunity to return to the life of a "country lawyer."

Condolences poured in.

To Mrs. Wing: "His passing is a distinct loss to our country and a loss to me of a valued comrade in arms whom I held in deep affection." — Gen. Douglas MacArthur.

Via dispatch: "Regret exceeding to have learned of 'Friar Tuck's' death. Will you be good enough to extend my deepest sympathy to his old comrades and family." — Admiral William 'Bull' Halsey.

"Vermont lost its No. 1 soldier this morning." — Rutland Herald front page

"Gen. Wing possessed the integrity and honesty which caused him to be considered the true friend of all in his command." — Vermont Standard, Woodstock

Rutland, a city that had celebrated their hero seven weeks earlier, now mourned. On Dec. 23, people packed the Baptist Church for the funeral. Then thousands silently watched the funeral procession make its way to Evergreen Cemetery. There, the general "was laid to rest . . . beneath a great evergreen tree on a snow-clad hill" in Rutland. Wing's service guaranteed him a plot in Arlington National Cemetery, but "Rutland and his family claimed him for their own" and that is how it remained. The committal service was read, a band played strains of "Nearer, My God to Thee," the honor guard delivered a final volley and "Taps" echoed through the winter air.

Today, a simple marble military stone marks his grave. Gen. Jacob L. Devers, commander of the U.S. Army ground forces, decorates Maj.

Gen. Wing with the Distinguished Service Medal as a climax to the Rutland exercises.